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Study: Thriving Internet blighted by bugs

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By Robert Lemos
Staff Writer, CNET News.com

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Internet usage has jumped in the last year, but digital threats--such as junk e-mail and e-commerce fraud--continue to overshadow those gains, VeriSign announced on Monday.

Several measures of network traffic show an increase, according to a survey by VeriSign that looked at data generated by its Internet operations.

The number of queries to VeriSign's domain name service (DNS) system--the address books of the Internet--during the first week of the month of August increased 50 percent over the same period the previous year, while DNS lookups for e-mail grew 245 percent, the company found.

Unsolicited bulk e-mail--or spam--accounted for most of that boost, said Ken Silva, vice president of information security for VeriSign.

"The number of Internet uses or activity does continue to grow, but the dangerous activity on the Internet is growing faster than that," he said. "In August, we saw an incredible rise in the number of incidents, mainly due to security incidents."

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VeriSign has a unique view of the Internet because it has a role in so many aspects of the functions of the Net. The Mountain View, Calif.-based company maintains the registry databases for the .com and .net top-level domains. Its subsidiary, Network Solutions, is a registrar, which means it provides a service to let people reserve domain names.

The security company also offers digital-signature services for Web sites and enterprises, to help them heighten the security of e-commerce and business-to-business transactions. It has another e-commerce service: Credit-card processing.

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VeriSign says it has been collecting the data for the past year. It released a snapshot of its analysis in its Internet Security Intelligence Briefing on Monday.

The company reported that e-commerce transactions in the second quarter of 2003 rose 17 percent per merchant this year, on average, compared with the same period the previous year. However, fraud on the Internet continued to grow, accounting for 6.2 percent of all transactions--far more than the 1 percent that is normal in the brick-and-mortar world, Silva said.

"There is a surprisingly high correlation between the IP (Internet protocol) source addresses of fraudulent activity and other hacker activity," he said.

As for the security events detected by devices VeriSign manages, the number of those jumped 99 percent in August, compared with the totals for May. The United States appears to be the leading source of such attacks, accounting for nearly 81 percent of the incidents.

However, two significant computer worms and a serious virus incident hit the Internet during August and may have accounted for part of the dramatic increase.

That month saw the MSBlast worm and a variant of that program spread to more than a million computers, security company Symantec has estimated. In addition, the computer virus SoBig.F spread to a projected tens of thousands of computers worldwide, producing an avalanche of spam as it attempted to infect more computers. In sending those messages, the SoBig.F worm caused the number of DNS queries related to e-mail to increase to 10 to 25 times the average, according to VeriSign's data.

The company is touting such insights into the data as part of a new family of security services, called the Security Intelligence and Control Services.

"Most people think if they buy the tools, such as intrusion-detection (software) and firewalls--they think they are covered. That's not necessarily true," Silva said. "Don't just sit in the foxhole. (You need to) see things as they happen around the world in a real-time fashion."

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